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Art Labor, Sex Politics: Feminist Effects in 1970s British Art and Performance (Book Review)

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critique of how modern and contemporary art is studied and discussed in light of the modern idea of the genius. Within each chapter is an examination of how “professional historians” and “academic scholarship,” specifically Western art historians and academia, intimately link the artist and their art, equating the value of the person with the interpretation of their work. This “western” idea of modern history framed the way such art was viewed as “western” by critics in India. By infusing secular modernist visual forms with Hindu iconography, Husain becomes a monster in the eyes of Hindu nationalists and critics as they view his work as obscene and monstrous. Zitzewitz also points out how the methods used to study Indian modernism emphasize Indian art as a “single generative form,” rather than a living and dynamic complexity. In other words, she subtly accuses art historians of Orientalism in their methods of interpreting art. By applying the methods and interpretations of western art to Indian art, the meaning of the work is missed -- or more precisely, dismissed -- as the idioms are recognized as being rooted in western art, rather than as tools for expressing the artist’s own experience, which in these cases is not, as a whole, European. Thus, Zitzewitz questions the assumption that modernism is somehow a late import to Indian art, supplanted by “contemporary” art at the close of the last century. Instead, modernism appears to have been used in India as a deliberate statement of artistic freedom right at the moment when Indian art and politics came to a crucial debate about secularism and its relevance to India and Indian cultural identity.

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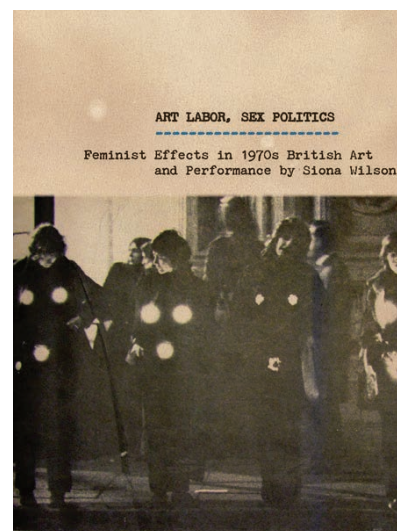
Art Labor, Sex Politics: Feminist Effects in 1970s British Art and Performance

Siona Wilson

Minneapolis, University of
Minnesota Press, 2015, 320 pages,
56 b&w photos, 11 color plates.
\$105.00 cloth; \$29.95 paper. ISBN
978-0-8166-8573-8

The main premise of this compelling study is the fraught relationship between feminist and leftist politics in British art of the 1970s. Siona Wilson especially seeks to resituate the contributions of psychoanalytic feminism within Marxist critiques of work and production and, more broadly, to the role of political art activism during this period. In contrast to many accounts of the 1970s as a decade marked by political malaise and artistic stasis, Wilson’s case studies reanimate the important contributions of the women’s liberation movement to the “slower work of social change” (xiv) that occurred in the aftermath of the May 1968 uprisings. As such, her study builds significantly on John A. Walker’s broader survey of the decade, *Left Shift: Radical Art in 1970s Britain* (2002), while also making a vital contribution to the broader field of contemporary feminist art history.

Wilson uses an early and influential feminist text, Juliet Mitchell’s “Women: The Longest Revolution” (1966) to frame the key concepts in the artworks she discusses. A comprehensive critique of the failure of Marxist theory to adequately address female oppression, Mitchell’s essay identified four overlapping areas of concern to women’s social position: production, reproduction, sexuality, and the socialization of children. These issues



would go on to shape key debates in British feminist circles, as indeed elsewhere. Each of Wilson’s case studies, in turn, reveals how artists variously put into practice aspects of Mitchell’s four-part concerns.

In chapter one, Wilson focuses on *Nightcleaners* (1972-75), a film by the London-based Berwick Street Film Collective about attempts to unionize female office cleaners. Its first screening in 1975 at the Edinburgh International Film Festival garnered mixed reviews. After years of post-production, the agit-prop film as it was initially conceived had morphed into something closer to the visual experimentations associated with avant-garde filmmaking. Consequently, Wilson notes, many feminists took issue with its failure to deliver a straightforward message about the union campaign. Conversely, while the status of the film as avant-garde was secured with the Edinburgh screening, Wilson details the ways in which *Nightcleaners* also deviated from the Brechtian and structuralist approaches popular in British film practices at the time. Its numerous close-up shots of the female worker’s faces, she proposes,

introduces an affective register that avant-garde filmmakers would have deemed “frivolous moments of cinema viewing” (20).

Wilson also proposes that because the affect in *Nightcleaners* is “ambivalent,” this may have also proved problematic for feminists seeking stronger emotional statements from the film. As a minor affect, ambivalence is not typically associated with the volatile passions of political activism. Indeed, Wilson concludes, *Nightcleaners* offers no solution to the problem of the women’s labor unionization. To that end, she cites a moment in the film in which one of the cleaners, a Caribbean woman, flatly retorts to a feminist interviewer’s call to action: “There’s no ‘get together’ here” (49). The inflection of racial tensions in this comment forms yet another unresolvable element of the class and sexual politics with which the film is more directly concerned, and Wilson rounds out this chapter with a brief assessment of the impact of *Nightcleaners* on British postcolonial filmmaking in the 1980s.

In chapter two, Wilson concentrates on a number of Mary Kelly’s early collective and individual projects. In addition to being directly involved with *Nightcleaners*, Kelly also worked with the London Women’s Film Group on *Woman of Rhondda* (1973), a film about the women in a mining community in South Wales and the unpaid domestic care they provided to the men working the mines. The film reveals the ways in which their gendered work as wives and mothers could not be recognized in traditional Marxist terms, leading the women to feel devalued within the larger framework of working-class rights. In her individual artistic practice, Kelly subsequently took up

this problem of how to acknowledge the affective and physical dimensions of female reproductive work.

Most of chapter two addresses Kelly’s film-loop installation, *Antepartum* (1974). Although it originally took the form of two film-loops projected side by side, one showing a woman’s hands operating an industrial machine, the other offering a close-up view of the artist’s nude and heavily pregnant midsection, subsequent iterations of *Antepartum* only include the latter. Wilson suggests that Kelly jettisoned the original comparison to bring more emphasis to the spectator’s positioning vis-à-vis the pregnant body on screen. Tellingly, one of the most influential essays on film spectatorship, Laura Mulvey’s polemical “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975), was first drafted in 1973 when both Kelly and Mulvey, along with Juliet Mitchell, were founding members of the Lacan Women’s Study Group. Reading *Antepartum* against “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Wilson reiterates many of the limitations critics have already identified in Mulvey’s psychoanalytic reading of the male gaze. Simultaneously, she identifies in Kelly’s work an implied feminine and embodied viewing position that Mulvey adamantly foreclosed. After proposing that Kelly’s camera work in *Antepartum* serves as “a visual metaphor for the umbilical cord” (86), Wilson concludes: “the spectator is imaginatively reconnected as mother to the woman’s navel on screen ... she is imaginatively connected as mother to the unborn child not yet visible on-screen but narratively implied” (87). Wilson provides a sophisticated argument for the possibility of (re)productive feminine work that is not only occluded in Mulvey’s account of masculine

cinematic pleasure, but as well in the Marxist preoccupation with wage production. This work “allows for reimagining both feminine subjectivity and masculine alienation from genetic reproduction” (90).

With chapter three, Wilson turns to the collective work of COUM Transmissions, particularly its provocative exhibition of 1976, *Prostitution*, at London’s Institute of Contemporary Art. Founded in 1969 by P-Orridge (né Neil Megson) and Cosey Fanni Tutti (née Christine Newby), COUM drew its idea of collectivity from street theater and alternative music scenes, and was not as politically mobilized as other British collectives of the day. Indeed, its form of social engagement with taboo subjects frequently put it at odds with the art establishment. *Prostitution* marked the group’s final engagement with the art world just prior to its transformation into the post-punk band, Throbbing Gristle. The ICA exhibition included an installation of signed pages from underground pornographic magazines featuring Tutti as the model, a continually updated media wall of press responses to the exhibition, a performance by the punk band Chelsea, and a series of used tampon sculptures by P-Orridge. A raucous blending of high and low, of eroticism and obscenity, *Prostitution* has not typically been regarded as a feminist project.

Wilson identifies an important Duchampian legacy in the word-plays and visual antics of COUM’s projects. However, she primarily reads the group’s final work through a queer feminist lens in order to illuminate its transgression of both genre and gender. Marshaling the work of a number of queer theorists, Wilson ultimately aligns COUM’s taboo-breaking actions with Julia

Kristeva's psychoanalytic concept of abjection, or that which disrupts boundaries and collapses meaningful distinctions. Wilson then compares the genre/gender-bending of *Prostitution* to Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document* (1974-79), a now canonical feminist project produced right after *Antepartum* that draws on Lacanian theory to chart the psychological and social development of the mother-child dyad. Wilson argues that while both *Post-Partum Document* and *Prostitution* address the symbolic codes of sexual difference, COUM's project is a "perverse" (136) undoing of the heteronormative structure of Kelly's, its disruptive abject labor less analytical but perhaps more radical in its refusal to uphold the reproductive logic of the Lacanian symbolic order. This order, which marks a child's acquisition of language and affirms his normative gendered position within patriarchal structures, finds no future in COUM's disruptive queer aesthetics.

In her last chapter, Wilson reads Jo Spence and Terry Dennett's photographic project, *Remodelling Photo History* (1979-82), against the politicized milieu of conceptual photography in Britain and the U.S. in the late 1970s. She makes a convincing case that the former's approach to representational politics differed significantly from photographic practices now commonly dubbed "postmodern," and associated foremost in Britain with Victor Burgin's work. Wilson applies a term originally associated with interwar worker photography, "proletarian amateurism" (140), to characterize Spence and Dennett's alternative approach to the medium. This term, she suggests, encapsulates several aspects of their collaboration: their engagement with the history and pedagogy

of documentary photography, their own working-class affiliations and pursuit of self-education, and their willingness to transgress prevailing artistic and social codes of taste.

Comprised of six pairs of images featuring the two artists in staged scenes reminiscent of different photographic genres—artistic, ethnographic, and criminological, for instance—*Remodelling* specifically utilizes a technique known as the "deadly parallel," popular in leftist circles of the 1930s, in which images are juxtaposed to draw out otherwise hidden social and political analyses. After detailing the ways in which the pairings address the theme of labor, Wilson then turns to the psychoanalytic structuring of sexual difference in Spence and Dennett's deadly parallels. Again, Kelly's *Post-Partum Document* serves as a useful comparison. A notable feature of this project is the absence of iconic representations of the female body, a move likely inspired by the reverberations of Mulvey's essay on the male gaze. In contrast, certain pairings in *Remodelling Photo History*, especially those in which Spence's breasts are prominently and at times humorously featured, stage a more complex set of interconnections between "ideas of femininity, looking, photography, voyeurism, and the semiotic" (189) that Wilson reads through the Lacanian concept of the gaze—a concept Mulvey in fact misstates in her germinal text. For Lacan, the gaze is not about visual pleasure and objectification but rather the blind spot in visual perception, or that which eludes the visible. Thus of *Remodelling*, Wilson concludes: "Meaning is not made simply through the model of the sign with an emphasis on what is present, but rather through a *chain of signifiers*

that is built on absence and displacement" (192; italics in original). This, in turn, points to a different politics of representation than conventional accounts of postmodern photography have acknowledged.

Wilson's application of Lacanian theory to *Remodelling* cannot be easily unpacked in this review. However, it is a reflection of the work that the book does as a whole. First is Wilson's careful attention to the formal, social, and psychic structure of all the artwork she discusses. As she notes throughout, questions of form and presentation need to be closely addressed lest the art become simply an illustration of theory. Next, by continually invoking Kelly's *Post-Partum Document* and Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Wilson acknowledges the importance of these projects, but at the same time her attention to lesser known case studies reveals a much richer art historical landscape. *Post-Partum Document* and "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" have inspired characterizations of British feminist art as, above all, cool, analytical, and anti-aesthetic. Wilson's case studies share some of these qualities, but they also reveal the humor, perversity, and embodied pleasure with which many British artists, including Kelly herself, tackled questions of class and sexual difference.

Another important component of *Art Labor, Sex Politics* concerns the vital role of collaboration in the British art world of the 1970s. Initially fueled by a desire to reject bourgeois individuality and to model artistic practices on the logic of unionized labor, collaboration also became an important strategy for feminists seeking alternatives to the historical image of the lone, male artistic genius. Unwittingly, perhaps, feminist

art history has not been as attentive to collectivism, particularly when in involved both men and women. Wilson suggests this is a result of the popular assumption that “*feminism equals women*” (xx; italics in original), an equation that has significantly affected the historical record, as for instance when *Nightcleaners* and portions of *Prostitution* were included in the touring exhibition of work by female artists, *WACK! Art and*

the Feminist Revolution, without any mention of the male collaborators.

Although *Art Labor, Sex Politics* is a well-researched and thoughtful account of the “labyrinthine channels” (xxv) connecting feminist and leftist practices in British art of the 1970s, it is somewhat tangled itself. Given the complex ways in which Wilson’s subjects overlap, this is perhaps unavoidable. Nonetheless, a lot of descriptions are offered piecemeal,

while at times, too, the arguments become too dense or wide-ranging for the allotted space. The material in chapter four, for instance, begs to be a book all of its own. In the end, however, this does not take away from the convincing accounts Wilson sets forth on these bodies of work and their contributions to British feminist practices.

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